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Historic Leaves

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1875 to 1898



JOHN FRANCIS AYER

In Memory of

JOHN FRANCIS AYER

Papers read before the
SOMERVILLE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Monday, December 7, 1914

“And, doubtless, unto thee is given
A life that bears immortal fruit
In those great offices that suit
The full-grown energies of Heaven.”

HISTORIC LEAVES

VOL. IX.

OCTOBER, 1915

No. 1

JOHN FRANCIS AYER

It is a great privilege you have accorded me to stand before so many friends of my dear father, and to contribute what I may to this gathering in his memory. I cannot think of any form of memorial that would be more acceptable to him than such a one as you have planned in the intimacy of this much-loved society. He saw the fitness of a sympathetic tribute to the departed, and worthy effort of his own had been expended to revivify the deeds and records of those no longer with you. He delighted in imagination to reconstruct the past and to give it honor.

His family is one most easily traced, as many volumes in the Boston Public Library contain its early history. Among these I might mention the volumes of the Essex Antiquarian, the Genealogies of the Ayer Family, the Greely Family, the Tremain Family, and several brochures of local family records in different towns or states. Fortunately for the busy person who has not time to sift and calculate, they all hark back to the identical source, the father in England of those who settled in America. The several strains are entirely distinct and can be followed without difficulty.

An interesting quotation from an old book of heraldry gives the origin of the name as follows: "Ayres or Eyre: the first of the family was named Truelove, who was one of the followers of William the Conqueror. At the battle of Hastings, A. D. 1066, Duke William was thrown from his horse and his helmet beaten into his face; which Truelove, observing, pulled it off and horsed him again. The Duke told him

"Thou shalt be from Truelove called Eyre (or air) because thou hast given me the air I breathe. After the battle the Duke on inquiry respecting him, found him severely wounded (the leg and thigh having been struck off). He ordered him the greatest care, and on his recovery gave him lands in Derby in reward for his services, and the leg and thigh in armor cut off for his crest, an honorary badge yet worn by all the Eyres in England." (This is reproduced in the family histories.) "The seat he lived at he called Hope, because he had hope in the greatest extremity." He was knighted by William and became Sir Humphrey le Heyer. In direct descent from him was Galpedus le Heyer, of the time of Edward II. Fifth in descent from Galpedus was Thomas Ayer, of New Sarum, England, who held lands in Winston, County of Dorset, in the twenty-first year of the reign of Queen Elizabeth. He was the father of those who emigrated to America during the reign of Charles I.

Among the immigrants of that time were large numbers from the vicinity of Ipswich and Haverhill in Suffolk, Salisbury in Wiltshire, and Newbury. In establishing themselves in the new country, they named their settlements after their English home towns. Thus Ipswich in Massachusetts was founded in 1633, Newbury in 1635, Salisbury in 1639, and Haverhill in 1640. Conspicuous among these early settlers was John Ayer, son of Thomas, previously mentioned. John Ayer was born in Wiltshire, England, in 1592; died March 30, 1657, at Haverhill, Mass. He brought with him to this country in 1637, besides his wife, eight children. He lived first at Salisbury, then in Ipswich, and finally became a resident of Haverhill in 1645, where he remained until his death in 1657. He and his two brothers, Robert and Thomas, were leading men among the earliest settlers of Haverhill. Their descendants are very numerous. In 1700 it was supposed that nearly one-third of the inhabitants of Haverhill township were Ayers. John built a house on the main highway to the north, with land reaching south to the Merrimac River. Since that time

until beyond the middle of the last century, this house was constantly occupied by his descendants, its last owner having been of the sixth generation, a brother of my father's grandfather, who also was born in the house.

John Ayer's son Robert was born in England in 1625 before the emigration of the family. He died in Haverhill in 1711. He was a freeman, a farmer, selectman in 1685, and one of a committee of three to install the second minister of Haverhill, Rev. Benjamin Rolfe.

His son, Samuel, born in 1654, was one of the most worthy and intelligent citizens of Haverhill, serving as constable, member of the Provincial Assembly, selectman, tithing man, first town treasurer, deacon, and captain of militia. He performed valiant service against the Indians in King Phillip's war. On August 27, 1708, Haverhill, then a compact village of about thirty houses, was attacked and almost entirely destroyed by Indians under the direction of the French forces from Canada. Sixteen of the inhabitants, among them the minister before-mentioned, Rev. Benjamin Rolfe, were massacred, and many made captives. When the enemy retreated they were followed by Captain Samuel Ayer with a company of twenty men, who, though outnumbered thirteen to one, attacked them fearlessly, killing nine of their number and retaking several prisoners. The captain was shot in the groin and died just as his son reached the scene with reinforcements. From Samuel the descent proceeds through James, 1686, John, 1714, Obadiah, 1751, Nathaniel, 1787, Nathaniel, Jr., 1812, John Francis, 1858.*

*James Ayer, born Haverhill 27 October 1686; married Mary White, 10 May, 1711; died 19, December 1771. Their son John Ayer, born Haverhill 18 April, 1714; married (1) Elizabeth Hale of Newbury, 27 January, 1746; died 17 September 1757; married (2) Sarah, widow of Daniel Perkins of Boxford, 26 September, 1759; died 1777. By his first marriage, Obadiah Ayer was born Haverhill 24 June, 1751; married Elizabeth Whittier of Haverhill 22 January, 1778; died 28 March, 1823. Their fourth child and second son was Nathaniel Ayer, born Haverhill, 26 June, 1787; married Elizabeth Fordick, 12 September, 1811, born Charlestown 10 May, 1791, dau. David and Mary (Frothingham) Fordick; died Winchester, 27 October 1872. Nathaniel Ayer, Jr. born Charlestown 15 June, 1812; married 31 August 1834, Fannyline dau. Hezekiah R. and Mary Miller; died Boston, 20 March, 1874.

John Francis Ayer, born Charlestown 18 March, 1838; married (1) Harriette Maria, dau. Charles Curtis and Harriet (Stevens) Smith of Charlestown, 15 September, 1858; married (2) Vashti E. Hapgood, 14 October, 1897; married (3) Cora F. Barnes, 20 November, 1909; died Wakefield, 20 April, 1914.

My father was born in Charlestown on March 18, 1838, the second son of Nathaniel Ayer, Jr., and Emmeline Miller, both born in Charlestown. He attended the Warren School then the Charlestown High School. His memory of Charlestown in those days is of a town "as aristocratic" (as he used to say) "as old Concord." He used to be sent by his grandmother to invite her friends to tea. The little boy of ten or twelve had to present himself at the front door with a little speech which his grandmother had prepared for him in which she had carefully drilled him. Thus he delivered himself: "Mrs. Ayer presents her compliments and asks the pleasure of your company to tea at five o'clock tomorrow afternoon."

He left the high school in 1854 at the end of his second year. Those were stirring days in American history. Missouri and other southern states desired Kansas, then just being settled, to vote as a slave state. The North, particularly New England, was equally anxious that it should be free. In response to the call of the Emigrant Aid Society my father at the age of sixteen, with a yearning for adventure, and stirred to patriotism through public addresses and newspaper articles, joined a company of young men, himself the youngest, and travelled West to help form a free soil settlement in the new territory. The trains went only as far west as the Mississippi, to Alton, Illinois. From that point the young traveler went four hundred miles south on a Mississippi River boat to St. Louis. The next stage of his journey was by boat up the Missouri, for about as long a distance to Kansas City, then only a wharf and a straggling settlement. From there, a party sent out prospecting chose a spot thirty miles away where the young emigrants pitched their tents and gave the name of Lawrence to their town. My father, always clever with his pencil, made a picture of the first house in the town, which he sent folded in a letter to my mother. This house was used as a store for supplies for the settlers and the Indians. My father acted as clerk in the daytime

and slept upon the counter at night. He learned to trade with the Indians in their own language. He became a member of a shot-gun battalion, the first military organization in the town, whose duty was largely to assist the sheriff in carrying out the edicts of the squatter courts.

The two years he spent in Kansas were full of rich experience for him. As children we never tired of hearing stories of real Indians, and the war whoop was as familiar to our ears as the sound of his voice. His recollections included pro-slavery agitations and disagreeable acquaintance with advocates of such measures.

I think sometime in later life my father had a half-regret that he had not remained in Lawrence. Members of the party became prominent citizens, honored throughout the state, one of them being the first governor. Later the State University was established there, and the city is now and has been for many years the intellectual and literary centre of the state. At the time of its semi-centennial in 1904, my father was invited to return and to take part in its celebration. He was an honored guest on that occasion, and renewed his acquaintance with the few surviving first settlers. The little log-house, a picture of which he had made fifty years before, was re-produced and graced many a souvenir.

I suppose he was really drawn back to the East through his love for my mother, to whom, young as he was, he had been devoted for many years. She was two years his senior, and at the time of his return was teaching in the Charlestown High School. Two years later, in 1858, they were married and came to Somerville to live in a house still standing, although remodeled, on Chester avenue, in which Mr. Sears Condit lived for many years.

They became identified with the Cross Street Universalist Church, which they loved and served throughout thirty-eight years of a singularly congenial married life, all of which was spent in Somerville with the single interruption of a year or two in Medford.

During their earlier years in Somerville they retained some connection with the city of their birth, and in particular with The Charlestown High School Association, of which my father was president for a time.

The outward events of his life are really few, for his interest was mostly in his home and the plot of ground in which his flowers and vegetables grew, and his pleasure was in caring for them and his live-stock. He never belonged to a purely social club. He was a member and for a time treasurer of The Universalist Club, which is composed of laymen in that church in Greater Boston. He never held public office and had no ambition so to do. At various times in his life he belonged to dramatic, literary and historical societies, serving in nearly all of them as president through some part of their existence. He was president of The Montrose Reading Club after moving to Wakefield. He was one of the earliest members of The Somerville Historical Society and of The Bay State Historical League, of which he was formerly secretary.

After my mother's death in 1896 he was twice married. His wife, Vashti E. Hapgood, was known to many of this company. She was corresponding secretary of The Somerville Historical Society for some time. Before her marriage she had taught school in Somerville for many years. She was a lady of refinement and ability both mental and practical, and for eleven years she was the ornament of his home. She shared his joy in the exercise of hospitality, and was a loyal and true wife.

His third marriage to Miss Cora F. Barnes, of Worcester, was equally happy. She cared for him with great devotion and he lavished upon her the affection which was one of his strongest characteristics.

Perhaps a short analysis of his personality may not be out of place. He was reticent, although a certain pleasantness of manner may have concealed the withdrawing sen-

sitiveness underneath; but I think it was difficult for people to discover *himself*. His pleasantness of manner was a perfect index, however, of the pleasantness of his disposition, that manifestation of a man's character which is most in evidence in his own home circle, which, as we who knew him best can testify, grew sweeter and kinder as the years went by. Enjoying almost perfect health through all his life, he gave a noticeable impression of perennial youth. Although his hair grew white at an early age, his eyes were bright, his cheeks rosy, his step springing, and, best of all, his thought was young almost to the end of his life. It was only in the last year or two that we felt he was beginning to take the old man's view of things. Until a year or two of his death he rarely ascended the stairs of his home except upon the run. He never used a cane, and would have felt a great humiliation if it had become necessary. His interest in historical matters was fed by what was a very fundamental characteristic, a temperamental love of the picturesque. He reached back through his associations with his grandparents to the last part of the eighteenth century. His imagination was constructive. He visualized the deeds and environment of an earlier day, and he revelled in the picture. He wanted to commemorate such deeds and such environment, and worked diligently to have historical tablets fittingly inscribed for that purpose. The picture in his mind rather than the historical significance of the event may have been the incentive to perpetuate in memory such scenes as the launching of the Blessing of the Bay, the slow-moving boats through the Middlesex Canal, or the raising of the flag on Prospect Hill. His Kansas experiences were important to him in the same way. The strange new country, the war whoops and paint of the Indians, the sullen slaves along the way in Missouri, the weird lights and bonfires seen from the river boats, all these colored and augmented his interest in the entrance of Kansas into the Union as a

free state. The log-hut, the muddy Shawnee River, the squaws with their papposes on their backs, the long, lonely night rides across the prairies for supplies, these were the things that lingered in absolute vividness in memory and were cherished as valuable possessions, quite as much as the fact that, living in that environment, he had played his small part in a great national crisis. This same seizing hold of the picturesque in any situation explains his enjoyment of nature. No one could ever have found more delight in natural beauty than he. He saw it in every phase of every season. It was his solace in trouble. Although his ear was dulled for music so-called, he heard a thousand sounds in nature with joy; the call of the birds, whose names and notes and haunts he knew, the noise of running water, the boom of surf upon the rocks, or even the silence of the woods which he claimed was vocal to him.

An ever-youthful spirit, a lover of the birds, of brooks and fields, of sunrise, the ocean, and the mountains, he was a poet unexpressed, an elemental artist. Of singular purity of personal life and thought, he cherished the verities of the spirit and furthered their advancement. Although not an educated man in the common acceptance of that term, he valued learning and the fruits of it, and was open-minded toward its newer forms. His children and grandchildren rejoice in the rich legacy of his memory.

Lillian F. A. Mautsby.

TRIBUTE OF MR. WILL C. EDDY, AUBURNDALE, MASS.

Mr. President and Associates in Historical Work:—

You do well to memorialize one who has been such an active force in promoting historical work as did Mr. John F. Ayer, so long connected with the work of the Bay State Historical League.

You knew him in your own Society and we all knew him in connection with the Bay State Historical League.

Life is the mirror of king and slave—

'Tis just what we are and do;

Then give to the world the best you have,

And the best will come back to you.

—Madeline S. Bridges.

He was the "moving spirit" in the organization of the League and its president during 1903-4-5, and then, at his own request, was retired at Ipswich from the presidency, but not allowed to retire from active participation in its management, for he was elected secretary. As to his purposes in this, the League, this evidence is gleaned from the records of that meeting: "A year ago this month the Bay State Historical League was organized and the government set about formulating a plan of operation. It was a new thing; there was no similar organization in the state, there was no precedent to refer to, to fall back upon. To bring the local organizations into the League, to ascertain the needs of each, the methods of work of every local society, the sources of success in this instance, the cause of partial failure, the formulating of plans whereby all might benefit, the holding of meetings from time to time in various places, to organize societies where none existed, to stimulate historical study and assist the local societies in their efforts to preserve everything of value pertaining to the history of their several districts by suggestion or advice,"—These were the prime objects and the reason for the existence of the League.

"I am not concerned that I have no place;
I am concerned how I may fit myself for one.
I am not concerned that I am not known; I
seek to be worthy to be known."

There is no record of the first meeting of the League, but from the second meeting there is evidence most complete as to the work marked out for the organization by Mr. Ayer. It has been a great force in building historical societies and the strongest ones today are those that have followed the League persistently.

The record of June 2, 1906, has this, when Mr. Ayer declined to accept re-election as president: "What the League absolutely needs is: first, a secretary, someone to put into shape for use, or for reference, the information furnished by the several members; and second, funds to meet the expenses of this work and also for office room with vault or safe accommodations, and for proper stationery."

I do not understand that Mr. Ayer was seeking the position of secretary when he made these remarks, but it came about that the speaker was elected president to "rattle around in his shoes" and he was elected secretary. As a secretary he was a pronounced success. He knew what he wanted for that position and he fulfilled his own ideal. His records were a marvel of completeness and detail and so put that they make a readable story. They were often so much in detail that we did not have time to read them for approval. But they were "approved without reading," for we had learned to know that they were correct.

While he was secretary it fell to his lot to edit the publication of the League and here again he showed his literary ability as well as his executive ability.

While I was president, Mr. Ayer was secretary and although my ideas were somewhat advanced over those previously followed by the League, I found Mr. Ayer equal to

adopting other methods and always willing to co-operate to that end.

When I retired from the office of president I was elected a member of the Executive Committee and have remained there since (although I doubt the wisdom of the League in so continuing me), but it gave me the opportunity of keeping in touch with Mr. Ayer and his part in the work.

June 24, 1911, Mr. Ayer "read his report of the proceedings of the year." He then read what might be called his valedictory in which he positively declined a re-election; he also gave a very interesting resume of the history of the League "

And so he ended his active work as an officer of the League, but not his interest in it. This brought to the

"Where is the individual on the busy road of life who has any right to judge another? The fellow who does nothing is seldom criticised."

Helen Keller has said:—

"I long to accomplish a great and noble task, but it is my chief duty and joy to accomplish humble tasks as though they were great and noble."

No better memorial to efficient and faithful service can be desired for anyone than the records of the League written by Mr. Ayer, and we can all say: "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord." Mr. Ayer has passed to his last reward and we all have the pleasantest memories of him.

In closing let me say: "When the cradles of the universe shall have returned to the garret to rock no more; when the last tear shall have been wiped from sorrow's eye; when the dewdrops of heaven shall no longer quench the aching thirst of tender flowers; when the roses of the field shall have bowed their last sad good-night to God; when the sun shall have grown cold and is confined by destruction, then shall the work of such men cease, only to hear the glad response of angelic choirs, and to be received into that better world where pain and sorrow shall be no more."

FROM THE SECRETARY OF THE BAY STATE HISTORIC LEAGUE

I first made the acquaintance of Mr. Ayer in February, 1904, when the Nantucket Historical Association joined the Bay State Historical League and appointed me its delegate. In that connection I was brought into frequent contact with him and could not fail to note the cheery, optimistic way in which he conducted the affairs of the League. He had that unfaltering faith in its future which impressed itself upon others and compelled success. Earnest, indefatigable, ever on the alert to find new avenues for usefulness, and to enlist new gleaners in the field, with a personal magnetism that communicated itself to all his associates, working with him became a pleasure and he lived to see over fifty per cent. of the historical associations in Massachusetts arrayed under the banner that he had raised and borne with such distinguished success. We all greatly regretted when the time came, in 1906, that he felt he must put off the mantle of the presidency and, unwilling to lose his services in some official capacity, he was persuaded to accept the office of secretary, to which he was unanimously elected so long as he would serve. In 1909 he declined further official honors. His declination was reluctantly accepted and I became his successor. His earnestness and efficiency have made him a hard man to follow. I am glad to have the opportunity to pay my personal tribute to the memory of one whose geniality, ability and zeal made companionship with him a long-to-be-remembered pleasure.

Alexander Starbuck.

Waltham, July, 1915.

REMARKS OF FRANK M. HAWES

Before speaking of Mr. Ayer and his relations with the Somerville Historical Society, I cannot, on account of our intimacy, forbear alluding to the many years during which we knew each other. In 1861, when I was a lad, not yet in my teens, he dwelt a near neighbor of ours. Mr. and Mrs. Ayer, with their little son, went to the Cross Street Church where we attended, and between the two families acquaintance soon ripened into friendship. Mr. Ayer was active in Sunday School work, as a teacher, and later as the superintendent.

My recollections of him at that time, when in the full vigor of his early manhood, is of one whom you would not pass with a casual glance. He was a fine specimen of the genus, well-built, good-looking, with a glowing complexion, a full, expressive eye, a cheerful countenance, a cordial manner—all of which gave him a marked personality. And my picture of him, though imperfect, even those who have known him only in his later years will admit is fairly accurate.

As showing the leanings of the man and his fondness for local history, I will add here that when the Cross Street Society celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, Mr. Ayer was chosen the historian of the occasion. His address was put in permanent book form, and is one of the best things of the kind which he ever did. It must have been a labor of love.

My personal acquaintance with Mr. and Mrs. Ayer and their children, two of whom I had the pleasure of instructing while they were passing through their High School course, is a bright period to look back upon. I might speak of the two homes of Mr. Stephen A. Fuller and Mr. Ayer, who were partners in the lumber business. The houses which they built side by side on Walnut street are still standing. Later, the Ayers lived for many years on Flint

street, and later still on Walter street. From these homes they extended a hearty welcome to their friends and dispensed a cordial hospitality. It was my sad privilege to attend the funeral of Mrs. Ayer from the home on Walter street.

Mr. Ayer was the most fortunate of men in his second marriage, and to this wife, as much as to him, our Historical Society is greatly indebted. Her previous training made her an invaluable corresponding secretary. It was due to them, more than any others, that this Society held together during the last years that it occupied the Oliver Tufts House. Mr. Ayer, aided by his personality and a persuasiveness of speech, often raised funds without and within the society to pay off annual deficits or past indebtednesses. It is rather remarkable, it seems to me, after the cares and annoyances of his terms of office as our president, that he and Mrs. Ayer continued such a lively interest in the Society and more so because about this time they removed from Somerville to Wakefield. In spite of the distance and the inclemency of winter evenings, they endeavored to be present at our meetings.

During the remaining years of his life, after he ceased to be our president, Mr. Ayer continued in office as one of our vice-presidents and served as chairman of the Committee on Papers and Essays. He took delight in arranging annually our programmes for the season's list of speakers, and occasionally he would himself read a paper. One of these, on his experiences as a young man in Kansas, during the exciting days of its early history, was especially interesting and deserves to be printed as a valuable contribution to the story of that section and epoch.

Mr. Ayer was remarkably optimistic and had visions of seeing our Society highly prosperous and commodiously housed in a building of its own that would have been a credit to the city. He even went so far as to have plans

drawn and to devise means of raising the wherewithal. But his courage met only with discouragement. About this time I am pleased to think, his hopeful nature found recompense in the satisfaction which must have come to him as the originator and founder (as much as any one man was) of the Bay State Historic League. The successful accomplishment of this task will be set forth in this memorial by others.

In conclusion, then, to Mr. Ayer, because of his unstinted services as president of this Society and as a member of its Council almost from the beginning, we who knew him best, who worked with him for the good of the order, and derived from him an inspiration to continued effort, although the results of our labors have not always been so apparent as we could wish—would express here our grateful remembrance.

It was the sad office of some of us, on a bright spring day in 1914, to pay the last sad rites of respect to him for whom we are holding this memorial service tonight. By thus meeting together we wish to express our continued appreciation and to show that we still keep his memory green.

REMARKS BY MR. SETH MASON

Mr. Mason offered the following:—

Mr. President: Having been associated with Mr. Ayer officially for many years, both as a former treasurer and vice-president of this Society, I wish to bear tribute to his memory and to the conscientious and painstaking work for the interest of our society and the zeal he always displayed in its behalf. The success of our Society was always uppermost in his thoughts, and during the dark and somewhat discouraging period through which we have passed his cheerful optimism and sunny disposition has pierced the gloom and imbued us with fresh courage to face the uncertain future. We do well to hold this memorial in his honor, and enter on our records these well-merited tributes to one who has earned our love and respect. Let us strive to emulate his virtue and so may our lives be a blessing to all in the community in which we live.

∴ PROGRAM ∴

For the year 1914-1915

October 5—Semi-Annual Business Meeting.

November 2—The Relation of Church and Town in New England.

Rev. Edward Tallmadge Root.

November 16—Massachusetts Metes and Bounds; Past and Present.

Mr. John Stetson Edmands.

December 7—Memorial Tribute to John F. Ayer.

President Frank M. Hawes and Others.

1915.

January 4—Holland and the Pilgrims.

Rev. Hendrik Vossema

January 18—The American Indian.

Edwin R. Short, U. S. A.

February 1—The Somerville High School from 1852 to 1872.

Dr. George L. Baxter.

February 15—Recent Studies in Virginia, from Richmond to Williamsburg.

Colonel Darwin Cadwell Pavey.

March 1—Some Phases of Woman's Work During the Civil War.

Miss Mary E. Elliot.

March 15—Old Christ Church, Cambridge, Mass.

Mr. William E. Wall.

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